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Curriculum Preferences Patterns of Education Sciences Students from the University of Craiova

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Abstract

This study focuses on the problem of identifying curriculum preferences patterns of the education sciences students from the University of Craiova, Faculty of Theology, History and Education Sciences, Preschool and Primary Education specialization. The aim of the study is to construct a postmodern model of approaching curriculum optimization by means of studying curriculum preferences and interests.

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1. Introduction

The curriculum is approved by political institutions at the highest level (ministry, parliament) and it is based on subject areas teaching experimentally verified knowledge; however, most often the curriculum proves inappropriate, being rejected by the students - this is the main reason why it needs to be urgently adapted and optimized.

Starting from some concepts and suggestions made by D. MacDonald (2003), C. Lynn Jenks (2004) and E.W. Eisner (2000), we will try to identify the current trends in curriculum development, the most important impediments in the post-modern curriculum development, all in relation with the students' curriculum preferences.

In her work, D. MacDonald suggests that "the goals and processes of change are narrowly proscribed by existing structures, resources and traditions, with the result that schools always fall short of meeting the needs of young people and their communities" (MacDonald, 2003). Furthermore, curriculum theorists have most often

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used such descriptors as 'disarray', 'blind', 'floundering', 'failure' and 'schism' (Reid 1998, Hlebowitsh 1999, McGinn 1999, Westbury 1999 *apud* MacDonald 2003). The author cited above explains this by the fact that schools and educational authorities are unable to deal with the contemporary society and the emergence of a new approach - the post-modern education. This happens due to the fact that the previous curriculum models are no longer sufficiently adapted to the contemporary society.

The principle behind partnerships takes into consideration the multiple functions and inter-relations in the modern curriculum. Indeed, the curriculum establishes connections not only with the political and scientific stakeholders and teachers, but also with the moral factors, derived from the student's background. In elaborating new curriculum models, the principles of design, management, usefulness, teaching structure and methodology must be considered, based on the employers' requests and the students' preferences. Various socio-educational and psycho-social theories, especially those derived from pedagogic sociometry, sociodrama and psychodrama for therapy and educational purposes, mainly aim at emphasizing the important, if not decisive role of preferences. As an example, it's worth mentioning that the Higher U.S. Army Forces Command have managed to reduce by 30% the number of fallen aircraft just by using the sociometric methods in establishing the flight crew composition. The preferences, however simple at first sight, include a psycho-social and motivational factor of the highest quality, which must be considered in the curriculum design and structure.

The investigation into preferences and curricular interests aims at identifying the needs, wishes and aspirations of students, in relation with their curriculum exposure. Measuring the curriculum efficiency may have mostly been for diagnostic purposes; however, the research into interests and preferences sets the starting point in predicting future curriculum planning, by indicating aspects and content that the students would like to explore. If efficiency can be established using mostly closed-ended questions, identifying students' interests requires mostly open-ended or multiple choice questions, which allow as many answers as possible (Stunga, 2008). The above-mentioned considerations lead to the conclusion that modern and post-modern curricular models, based on the students' preferences, may be designed and experimented.

When exploring this essential relationship in the curriculum design and development, we will support our analysis on three studies published by highly reputed authors in the practice and theory of education curriculum: D. MacDonald (2003), C. Lynn Jenks (2004) and E.W. Eisner (2000). *The modernist education system* (which aggregates the three approaches presented above) is grounded on a set of assumptions (Leistyna *et al*, 1996 *apud* MacDonald, 2003) such as: it is highly regulated in terms of time and space; views knowledge as rational, linear and arranged in separate and distinctive "bundles"; views students as consumers of the official school curriculum, and aims for a regulated, democratic and egalitarian social order. Unlike this approach, *the post-modern curriculum reform* may be viewed as (MacDonald, 2003): moving towards an open system with constant flux and complex interactions; requiring interactive and holistic frameworks for learning, with students becoming knowledge-producers rather than knowledge-consumers; transformative rather than incremental with respect to change. Such change requires errors, chaos and uncertainty through the actions of the learners, and should bypass bureaucratic control that operates in oppressive ways.

According to a several research reports, many students observed that curriculum is not fit to their interests, preferences and jobs available on the market (Strungă, 2009). Hence, our investigation has two main **objectives**: 1) the optimization of the curriculum for the preschool and primary education and 2) to find out which are the curriculum preferences patterns of the preschool and primary education students from our university.

Taking into account other studies done in the field of curriculum preferences, we outlined a **general hypothesis**: If the research instrument is applied to students, there will be observed clear curriculum preferences patterns. The **particular hypotheses**, derived from the general one, are: 1) If the research instrument is applied to students, then they will prefer the subjects focused on applicative and methodological levels of their future occupation (Practicum, Romanian Language for Children); and 2) If the research instrument is applied to students, then they will not prefer subjects related to mathematics; 3) If the students are from a higher year, then their curriculum preferences patterns will be more pronounced.

The indicators by which we measured the hypotheses were the number of choices students gave to the open questions included in the questionnaire. Each mention of a subject received one point even if some students chose only one subject and other subjects included multiple choices.

2. Methodology

The survey was carried out at the University of Craiova, Faculty of Theology, History and Education Sciences, in June 2012, and included a sample of 102 students, half from the first year of study and half from the second year of study. Given the student population from this specialization is almost entirely comprised of females, all the subjects from our sample group were females, the age mean being 27. We used a systematic sampling procedure with a measuring step of 3.

We used a questionnaire with 7 questions (from which 4 were open questioned aimed at collecting data about curriculum preferences patterns and 3 aimed at collecting personal data). The research instrument was inspired by the sociometry tests first used by Jacob L. Moreno with the purpose of exploring not so much the relationship between the members of a group, but the curriculum preferences of education sciences students. Students positively sanction some subjects and reject the other, thus they construct a specific pattern of curriculum preferences. The first open question asked students to name the subjects that are the most interested in. The second question asked students to name the subject they are not interested to study. The rest of the questions gathered data about students' year of study and age. The questionnaires were completed anonymously and were distributed among the students during the seminars for the following subjects: 'Curriculum Theory and Methodology' (for the first year of study) and 'Pedagogic Research Methodology' (for the second year of study).

We operationalized the particular hypotheses by identifying dependent and independent variables. For both hypotheses, the independent variable is the introduction of the research instrument and the dependent variables are students' preferences towards the subjects focused on applicative and methodological levels of their future occupation (Practicum, Romanian Language for Children) respectively the rejection of subjects related to mathematics. For the third hypothesis, the independent variable is students' year of study and the dependent variable the number of preferred subjects.

The main statistical analysis procedures used were: frequency, standard deviation and mean. In order to identify the curriculum preferences patterns we calculated the sum of all the chosen subjects (each of them received one point) and then we divided the results to 100 obtaining a percentage of the preferred curriculum (PC) as opposed to real curriculum (RC) which was determined using the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) for each year (62 ECTS for the first year and 62 ECTS for the second year).

3. Results

We have observed the students from the second year had more preferences (126) regarding their curriculum than the students from the first year (53), the results suggesting a more complex pattern, which confirms the third hypothesis. However, the preferences of the two samples of students are quite different in respect to their curriculum. For example, students from the first year chose the following subjects as their favorite (see Table 1): Romanian literature and Romanian literature for children (24.44% from their preferred curriculum - PC), psychology of personality (13.16%), theory and methodology of curriculum (11.28%). The first year students rejected the following subjects: mathematics (-26.32%) and physical education (-3.76%). The second year students preferred other subjects like (see Table 2): preschool and primary school education pedagogy (15.8%), preschool pedagogical practicum (8.69%), primary school pedagogical practicum (8.69%). The second year students rejected the following subjects: arithmetic teaching methodology (-13.43%) and mathematical activities methodology (-5.53%), plastic education (-4.74%) and physical education (-4.74%).

Table 1. Curriculum preferences patterns and for the preschool and primary education students (first year)

Subject	+	-	Total	%PC	%RC	ECTS
Romanian literature and Romanian literature for children	13	0	13	24.44	6.44	4
Psychology of personality	7	0	7	13.16	6.44	4
Theory and methodology of curriculum	6	0	6	11.28	9.66	6
Preschool pedagogical practicum	3	0	3	5.64	3.22	2
Primary school pedagogical practicum	3	0	3	5.64	3.22	2
Theory and methodology of instruction	2	0	2	3.76	6.44	4
Informational and communication technologies	2	1	1	1.88	4.83	3
Foreign languages	1	0	1	1.88	4.83	3
Fundamentals of psychology	1	0	1	1.88	9.66	6
Fundamentals of pedagogy	0	0	0	0	6.44	4
Romanian	0	0	0	0	6.44	4
Physical education	0	2	-2	-3.76	3.22	2
Mathematics	0	14	-14	-26.32	6.44	4

Table 2. Curriculum preferences patterns and for the preschool and primary education students (second year)

Subject	+	-	Total	%PC	%RC	ECTS
Preschool and primary school education pedagogy	20	0	20	15.8	6.44	4
Preschool pedagogical practicum	11	0	11	8.69	3.22	2
Primary school pedagogical practicum	11	0	11	8.69	3.22	2
Theory and practice of evaluation	10	0	10	7.9	6.44	4
Psychology of education	8	0	8	6.32	6.44	4
Ages Psychology	7	0	7	5.53	6.44	4
Romanian language and literature teaching methodology	9	4	5	3.95	6.44	4
Foreign languages	7	2	5	3.95	4.83	3
Language education activities methodology	4	0	4	3.16	6.44	4
Sociology of education	5	1	4	3.16	3.22	2
Environment knowledge methodology	5	3	2	1.58	4.83	3
Pedagogical research methodology	0	0	0	0	6.44	4
Management of educational institutions	2	3	-1	-0.79	4.83	3
Computer Assisted Instruction	0	2	-2	-1.58	4.83	3
Physical education	2	8	-6	-4.74	3.22	2
Plastic education	0	6	-6	-4.74	4.83	3
Mathematical activities methodology	0	7	-7	-5.53	8.05	5
Arithmetic teaching methodology	4	21	-17	-13.43	8.05	5

Given that both the first and second year students preferred subjects focused on a more applicative and methodological level (Romanian literature and Romanian literature for children, theory and methodology of curriculum, preschool and primary school education pedagogy, preschool pedagogical practicum, primary school pedagogical practicum) and rejected subjects related to mathematics (mathematics, arithmetic teaching

methodology, mathematical activities methodology), we can conclude that the first and second hypothesis have been confirmed as well.

We also observed that there is no correlation between the projected curriculum (PC), measured in the total number of preferences per subject and the real curriculum (RC), measured by the number of ECTS per subject. Using a parametric correlation analysis, the value of the Pearson coefficient for the first year $r = .109$, $p = \leq .001$, $n = 13$. For the second year, $r = -.231$, $p = \leq .001$, $n = 18$.

4. Discussion

First, the results can be understood as a confirmation of the general hypothesis: 'If the research instrument is applied to students, there will be observed clear curriculum preferences patterns' because the research instrument suggested clear subject preferences for both years as it is the case for preschool and primary school pedagogical practicum (first year – 5.64% from PC and second year – 8.69% from PC) or psychology (first year - psychology of personality – 13.16% from PC and second year – psychology of education – 6.32). Is it interesting to observe that in several cases the projected curriculum (PC) is much higher (and sometimes lower) than the real curriculum (RC). The immediate conclusion is that the curriculum preferred by students is not aligned with the real curriculum, as the Pearson correlations are suggesting. These results also confirm that there is a parallel curriculum consisting of students' preferences and motivations that needs to be adjusted with the real curriculum. The strong emotional reactions of students can be interpreted as an interest to study subject related only with socio-human subjects and as a tendency to approach preschool and primary teaching from a very practical point of view, students being more inclined to choose pedagogical practicum, Romanian literature and Romanian literature for children, theory and methodology of curriculum, preschool and primary school education pedagogy. These subjects are focused more on the very concrete aspects of the teaching experience and can be the students' answer to a curriculum that is heavily fragmented and charged with descriptive knowledge. This preference for procedural knowledge is very clear and needs to be taken in consideration by the curriculum planners.

5. Conclusions

Given the results, the survey proved to be a valuable tool for teachers, professors and curriculum designers with the aim of measuring and identifying patterns of curriculum preferences, facilitating the junction between the projected and real curriculum. We consider that the curriculum should be adjusted, fine-tuned and the opinions, preferences and interests of students should be taken in consideration by professors and curriculum planners. However, the preferences are constantly changing and a panel research using the same tool can be very effective in curriculum optimization.

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